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ABSTRACT

Duval and Wicklund proposed a theory of self-awareness that distinguishes between objective and subjective self-awareness, in which objectively self-aware individuals are assumed to focus attention on themselves and subjectively self-aware individuals direct attention toward external objects. To investigate self-awareness of physical attractiveness within a theory of objective self-awareness, subjects (N=75) at five age levels (from 7 to 70 years) ranked photographs of themselves and group members from most to least attractive. Results indicated that coefficients of concordance of interrater physical attractiveness rankings were statistically significant at all age levels. Individual's self-rankings, however, did not correlate significantly with cohort rankings of the same photographs. Subsequent interviews revealed that most subjects believed photographs of themselves could change their own as well as other's opinions concerning their physical attractiveness. Almost all young children liked photographs of themselves, while almost all middle-aged subjects disliked their photographs. The elderly appeared resigned to the changes in their appearance and to their photographs. The findings tend to support an objective self-awareness theory. (Author/NRB)

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THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN PHOTOGRAPHS AND SELF-IMAGE

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Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Eastern Psychological Association, New York, NY, April 22-25, 1981.

The Relationship Between Photographs and Self-Image

The present study examined the role of the photograph in one's self-awareness of physical attractiveness. Duval and Wicklund (1972) propose a theory of self-awareness that distinguishes between objective self-awareness (OSA) and subjective self-awareness (SSA). Objectively self aware individuals are assumed to focus attention on themselves. Subjectively self aware individuals direct attention toward external objects.

The notion of two forms of consciousness is not new. For Mead (1934), an individual's first consciousness is preoccupied with external objects. By taking the role of the other, a second consciousness develops in which the individual comes to view himself as others do. Piaget (1966) similarly distinguished between egocentrism and self-consciousness.

Although Duval and wicklund (1972) agree that others may be the source of the objective state, they have extended their theory to include impersonal sources such as looking at oneself in a mirror, hearing one's tape-recorded voice, or seeing a photograph of oneself.

When one's attention is focused on oneself, any discrepancy between the real and the ideal becomes apparent. If photographs are believed to be true representations, then one should become aware of discrepancies in physical appearance then looking at photographs of oneself.

Several studies (Cavior & Lombardi, 1973; Cross & Cross, 1971; Dion, 1973), have used photographs in examining judgments of physical attractiveness, but the photographs were always of others,

and therefore only stimuli to subjective self awareness.

Stereotypes associated with attractiveness are present in children as young as 3 years of age (Dion, 1973). In one study (Cavior & Lombardi, 1973) in which subjects were asked to rank photographs of other people for physical attractiveness, the 7-year-olds' rankings were the same as those of older subjects. However, if photographs of the subjects themselves had been included, and if photographs are believed by subjects to be realistic representations, then different results would be expected in the ranking of one's own photographs as compared to the rankings of those same photographs by others. This is what was done in the study to be reported.

Gombrich (1972) has pointed out that the snapshot portrait freezes features in a manner which one is usually not aware of, particularly when the features are of oneself. Although an uncharacteristic aspect may have been captured, that aspect did exist at some moment. Viewing this in a photograph of oneself is an experience quite different from viewing it in another.

The power of the photographic image has been aptly expressed by Susan Sontag (1977): Not only do people presume that images contain the qualities of real things, but real things are attrivuted with the qualities of an image. If this is so, then photographs can lessen one's insecurities about one's physical appearance or aggravate them.

Images taken by cameras have properties that are distinct from other images. Because the imaging process is mechanical, there exists a persistent belief that the camera objectively records what is in front of it. Thus, photographs have long

been recognized as an effective means of conveying and storing information independent of experience. Their value to astronomers, geologists, and sociologists, to name a few, has been inestimable. Newspapers and magazines use photographs as a means of conveying information to the public. Social reality can redefined by the photographs that are chosen as important at the moment, however arbitrary these choices may be.

The purpose of the present study was to look at self-awareness of physical attractiveness within the framework of objective/ subjective self-awareness theory. We assumed that if photographs act as stimuli to objective self awareness, one's reaction to photographs of oneself would be different from the reactions of other subjects to those images. We expected these reaction differences to decrease with age. It has been pointed out (Birren, 1964; Neugarten, 1964) that with agem people rationalize weaknesses and experience fewer discrepancies between the real and the ideal.. Fewer discrepancies would make the judgments of subjects closer to the judgments of others.

Seventy-five subjects at 5 age levels were studied: 7, 17, 30, 50, and 75 years. Subjects within each group were acquainted with one another. Five 4" x 5" black and white photographs were taken of each subject in different profile views.

One week later each subject was individually shown 14 sets of photographs from that person's age group in addition to those of him or herself and asked to rank them, within sets, from most to least attractive. After the photographs were ranked, each subject was questioned on the relation of the photograph to his or her own attractiveness.

Coefficients of concordance showed that group members at all age levels were in agreement in ranking a subject's photographs. Correlation coefficients between each subject's rankings of his or her own photographs and the group's rankings of the subject's photographs ranged from 1001 for 7-year-olds to .59 for 75-year-olds. These data indicate that one's own judgments of attractiveness come into closer agreement with others' judgments with increasing age.

Subjects' reactions to their own photographs are of particuar interest. All but the youngest subjects considered photographs of themselves to be true representations even when the photographs were discrepant from their images of themselves. However, they did not necessarily consider photographs of acquaintances to be true representations.

In response to being asked how they thought they usually look in photographs, 93% of the 7-year-olds thought their photographs were attractive. Only 53% of the 17-year-olds and 30-year-olds had the the same opinions of their photographs, whereas 13% of the 50-year-olds thought their photographs were attractive, probably indicating increasing displeasure with how their physical features were undergoing change. While most of the 75-year-olds did not think of themselves as attractive any more, 87% did think that they looked as attractive in photographs as they did in reality.

Most subjects at all age levels said that when they saw an attractive photograph of themselves it made them believe they were in fact attractive. When asked if an attractive or unattractive photograph was likely to change another person's opinion of the subject, all but the 7-year-olds answered affirmatively.

However, when asked if their own opinions of an acquaintance would change upon seeing a photograph of that person most subjects said no.

Subjects' beliefs in the reality of photographs of themselves are illustrated in the following examples: one 30-year-old woman said that if she had known that profile shots were being taked she would have put make-up on her nose to hide its bump. When it was mentioned that the bump would still be there in reality, even if it was hidden in the picture, she stated simply that it made her feel better about herself when whe saw a photograph without the bump on her nose. Another 30-year-old refused to have pictures taken with her glasses on, although she wore them all the time. She said that she did not like to think of herself as a person who wore glasses and therefore, she did not want herself or anyone else to see her in a photograph with them on. Whe would not even allow her sister to see such a photograph. One adolescent boy wanted to send one of the photographs of himself that he like to a girl he was dating. He believed that if she had the photograph, she would look at it, think he was good-looking, and continue to date him.

Although each group's reaction to the photographs was different, all subjects except the youngest experienced some discomfort upon being photographed. Middle-age adults, in particular, were extremely critical of themselves. Subjects in that group commented negatively about their pictures, as already indicated, and responded more quickly than other subjects when asked if they felt unattractive when confronted with an unattractive photograph. The 17- and 30-year-old subjects were

anxious about the outcome of their photographs, but their comments upon seeing unattractive photographs of themselves suggested that there was still time for improvement. Many of the 50-year-olds, however, conveyed an attitude of resignation about their unattractive state. The 75-year-olds were even more resigned to their physical appearance, but they were not as upset as were the 50-year-olds.

It is only in objective self awareness that a discrepancy between real and ideal states occurs. Avoidance of the stimuli which result in self-focused attention reduced the awareness of the discrepancy. This may explain the discomfort many subjects experienced in having their pictures taken and in looking at the finished product.

Thus the results of this study support objective/subjective self awareness theory and attest to the potency of the photographic image.

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